

Asking the Right Questions: Reflective Preparation for a Program Review

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Introduction

Academic program review is critical for assessing strengths and weaknesses for departments and programs and can take many forms. Often these reviews are based on process improvement models developed by quality and productivity experts, professional accrediting bodies, or standards-based organizations in the discipline (Roberts and Haven, 2017). One body of research in assessment that guides academic program reviews suggests value in the reviewees developing a self-study to result in more useful formative feedback from the program reviewers (Palomba and Banta, 1999; Shute, 2008). Value also comes from not only looking at achievements of faculty and staff, but also from assessing student learning outcomes (Novodvorsky, Tomanek, Foor, & Burd, 2015; Banta & Kahn, 2017). The feedback from the self-study guides programming, policy, and practice surrounding these areas.

The Department of Technology Leadership and Communication (TLC), housed in the Purdue School of Engineering and Technology at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), used a strengths-based, improvement-oriented, and consultative approach to conduct a reflective and evidence-based self-study for an external program review. To best use that process and guide the responses of the reviewers, we created six clear, critical questions. The review timing coincided with the expiration of the department's previous strategic plan. In addition to providing excellent, formative feedback that can contribute to the next strategic plan and changes in programming, policy, and practice, the process of the self-study provided the department with a valuable reflective team experience, built camaraderie, and resulted in positive change and growth beyond reviewer feedback.

This article will describe the process including preparing & implementing the self-study, involving stakeholders and developing critical questions, and creating a culture of continuous departmental improvement.

Preparing and Implementing the Self-Study

The TLC department was formed in 2012. As such a newly-created entity, in order to rapidly organize, implement, and accelerate accomplishments during that first year, we engaged in an ambitious strategic planning process. Because the programs in our department are not subject to external disciplinary accreditation, we developed, organized, and aligned the department self-study with the broad elements of the school and campus mission statements and strategic plans. In that first year as a department, our planning process was characterized by three actions: 1) explicit alignment with the school and campus plans, 2) widespread involvement of faculty and staff, and 3) additional input from TLC student, alumni, academic, and industrial stakeholders. Similarly, we wanted the self-study to be characterized by these same three actions so the department could analyze and assess our current position and determine future directions for the next stage of strategic planning.

The department is small, with only 1 full-time staff member and nine full-time faculty members (4 tenure-track professors, 4 lecturers, and 1 clinical professor). Therefore, all faculty and staff served as a single, large committee led by the department chair and undergraduate program directors. This team conducted the research, developed, and wrote the self-study. The chair was committed to ensuring a positive and valuable experience and used department

meetings to help with the planning. During these department meetings, the team clarified the purpose, organized the data collection, and organized the content. We began by listing our perceived departmental strengths and decided look at achievements of faculty, staff, and students as well as the assessment of program learning outcomes.

We included eight sections in the report: 1) Introduction, 2) Institutional Context, 3) Personnel, 4) Resources, 5) Teaching, Learning, Assessment, and Advising, 6) Research and Scholarly Activity, 7) Service and Civic Engagement, and 8) Strengths and Challenges. We used program and department meetings, advisory board meetings (Student, Alumni, Academic Partner, and Industrial Advisory Boards), stakeholder focus groups, and stakeholder surveys to collect data. We then documented the evidence for each of the report areas. This strengths-based and improvement-oriented approach provided an opportunity to examine the progress we made in a short time period as well as to develop priorities and ensure proper allocation of resources to the broader mission and goals at the department, school, and campus levels. Faculty participated individually and collectively in continuing to revise iterations of the report at various logical stages.

Involving Stakeholders & Developing Critical Questions

The consultative part of the approach included input from advisory boards, students and alumni, faculty (within and external to our department), staff, community members with an interest in our department, school and campus administrators, and external specialists and stakeholders in an effort to gather information about the department from both internal and external perspectives, develop the critical questions, and revise the self-study. This broad group of stakeholders was selected to ensure that the self-study would provide the reviewers with a comprehensive view of the department.

Developing clear critical questions for the external review team was a priority so we could get meaningful, formative feedback with conclusions and recommendations that related to our own goals. Internally, we developed these questions and the self-study report not only for the external review, but also to aid ongoing departmental improvement. All TLC stakeholders were involved in the development of these questions that were linked to the campus, school, and department priorities and the perceived departmental strengths and areas for improvement. The preliminary questions were sent to all stakeholders for review and revision twice and were finally approved by TLC faculty and staff at a departmental meeting.

Ultimately the questions focused on finding out how the department can recruit, retain, and reward a diverse faculty and staff and more high-quality first-time/full-time, how to use our limited resources to improve our research and scholarship, how to provide even better student support at all levels, and how to create pathways for graduates to continue their development while expanding our value in industry/business. Once the questions were added and the self-study was complete, several external disciplinary experts visited campus for a three-day intensive review. They were provided a copy of the self-study so they could review, analyze, and synthesize the information to make judgments about overall program quality and recommendations for improvement. They met with administration, faculty, staff, students, and community members to gather additional data. At the end of the three days, they provided a summary of their visit, and a few weeks later, a full report including recommendations. The recommendations addressed most of the critical questions and included even broader suggestions for meeting our goals.

Creating a Culture of Continuous Departmental Improvement

This 12-18-month process of conducting a self-study, developing questions, and going through a review brought the department together in a collaborative experience where we were able to, as a team, recognize both our strengths and some key areas that needed ongoing examination and improvement. Because of this process, we began implementing changes before the reviewers finished their report. Some early changes included improvement of learning outcomes and their assessment and expanding areas for recruitment and retention. We were able to hold ourselves accountable as beneficiaries of this strengths-based, improvement-oriented, and consultative approach and, as a byproduct, the culture in the department improved because we saw each other as part of a cohesive entity and formed closer relationships that lasted beyond the program review.

The external reviewers' recommendations will guide the development of the next strategic plan and additional programming, policy, and practice changes, but the process itself should be recognized as a significant part of positive change, growth, and ongoing planning for any program or department. Even programs that are not scheduling a formal external program review can foster internal curiosity and create questions to guide improvement. Selecting priority areas, developing questions around those areas, and creating a process for self-study with naturally occurring review points can help faculty broaden their view beyond the individual course levels to program (and department) levels and help staff see the importance and results of their contributions. Looking at a single question over time and measuring results could help departmental stakeholders see progress that might otherwise seem insignificant. Selecting a new question each semester could provide valuable data to help departments move toward future goals. In addition, the process can help build camaraderie as everyone collaborates to acknowledge achievements and develop new goals while creating a culture of continuous departmental improvement.

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